On the Edge of Blasphemy
Matthew 16:13-17
October 24, 1976

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Last week's Time Magazine reviewed the recent opening of a show of late 19th and early 20th century American paintings at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The reviewer suggested that the one dominant theme in art from that era is the question of God. And in a phrase that has become somewhat notorious in theological circles quoted the artist who described God - both with his brush and verbally - as an "oblong blur".

What image comes to mind when you think about God? Can you improve on "oblong blur"? Many people draw a blank and come up with an idea rather than an image. Philosophy suggests "the Ground of Being", "The First Cause", "The Prime Mover", "Eternal Mind". Psychiatry sometimes suggests that the unconscious image most of us carry around in our mental warehouse is of a father, our own father perhaps. And a very common childhood picture is a grandfatherly figure, replete with white robes and flowing beard.

The difficulty in the project itself has been described with penetrating wit by Aldous Huxley. In one of his novels, Those Barren Leaves, a woman is suddenly stricken with piety and a determination to turn her life around by becoming more spiritual. The way to do it, she assumes, is to think about God. So she crawls into bed to begin.

"God is a spirit," she said to herself, "a spirit, a spirit." She tried to picture something huge and empty, but alive. A huge, flat expanse of sand, for example, and over it a huge, blank dome of sky; and above the sand everything should be tremulous and shimmering with heat - an emptiness that was yet alive. A spirit, an all-pervading spirit. God is a spirit. Three camels appeared on the horizon of the sandy plain and went lolloping along in an absurd ungainly fashion from left to right. (She) made an effort and dismissed them. "God is a spirit," she said aloud, but of all animals camels are really almost the queerest; when one thinks of their firghtfully supercilious faces, with their protruding underlips like the last Hapsburg kings of Spain..."No, No; God is a spirit, all-pervading, everywhere. All the universes are made one in him." (The Meaning of Christ, cited by R.C.Johnson, mp.10).

What image comes to mind when you think about God? Is it any better than an oblong blur? Do you get caught in philosophic concepts? Is He a grandfather? Have you ever tried to conjure up a suitable image and found yourself drifting as the woman in Huxley's novel?

The Christian answer to the question, "What image of God?" is none of the above. It is simply Jesus: Jesus of Nazareth whom we know as Christ. Even better, it is what the theologians sometimes call "the Christ event". The Christian answer to the question of God includes a humble birth in Bethlehem, a life of teaching and healing, a death by crucifixion and a magnificently mysterious resurrection from death. All of that, Christian faith maintains, is what God has given us as His portrait.

The New Testament witnesses to that astounding claim in a variety of ways. In the prologue to the Fourth Gospel we read: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..."

St. Paul added his testimony: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (II Corinthians 5:19). And in the accounts of Jesus' ministry there was an occasion when the question was put to Him directly. "Show us the Father and we will be satisfied," Philip said to Him once. And Jesus responded: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:8-9).

What makes talking and thinking about God Christian talking and thinkins is the point at which it begins. When we think about God the normal process starts with a clearing away of all the underbrush and an attempt to get back to something primal, original, unchanging. "God is the Creator of all there is," for instance. Or, "God is the moral imperative built into the nature of things." Those theological statements may be excellent but they are not particularly Christian. The radical claim of Christian Faith is that theology begins with Jesus Christ: not with God as a philosophic concept - but with Jesus the man. That is fundamental. Yet, I sense that what theologizing we do is from the basis of a neutral paganism and that we are not really sure how Jesus Christ fits into it.

Think of it as an optical problem. The function of a pane of glass, for instance, is to assist us in seeing what lies beyond it. If you are looking at a garden on a windy day, your sight will be blurred and imprecise without the glass. Christian faith claims that apart from Jesus Christ God is blurry. John Calvin wrote: "All thought about God which does not proceed from the fact of Christ is a fathomless abyss." (Ibid, p.11). On the other hand, if you focus on the glass, the garden will still be a mass of blurred colors. You must look through the glass: God remains blurry if our attention stops with Christ and does not see through Him to the reality beyond. That, as you may recognize, is the theological distortion of a lot of American Christianity. It has become totally obsessed with Jesus: the fact that He points beyond Himself to the reality of God seems not to be important. Probably the most prototypical statement in American Christianity is "Jesus saves". It almost invites the conclusion that what Jesus saves us from is the angry wrath of God. What we really mean is that God saves us: God is our salvation, and He does it through Jesus Christ.

How, then, to describe Him? The New Testament presents a variety of images, some of which I have already mentioned. The early Church had a go at it as well. But, how to describe the most incredible, most unlikely thing that ever happened? That is the problem. ... David H.C.Read observes that language always breaks down when required to carry too heavy a load. As an example he cites a descriptive statement such as: "I saw the sun rise magnificently behind the Alpine peaks which were bathed in pink." Read observes that should we apply the same rigid scholastic logic to that as we sometimes apply to both Bible and Creed we would conclude that he was A.- a hopelessly naive romantic, or, B.- a liar. The fact is, the sun doesn't rise, the earth revolves and anyone who proposes that mountains take a bath cannot be taken seriously. (The Christian Faith, p.46). The perils of literalism are very real when we focus on what others have said about Jesus Christ.

One of the earliest attempts by the Church is The Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord." The Creed lifts up three words and assumes that we know what they mean when we use them: Christ - Son - Lord. Christ means Messiah, the one promised in the history of Israel. Son is an image more meaningful then than now perhaps. A man received his identity in the Aramaic language from his father. Simon bar Jonah - Simon, son of Jonah, was enough to tell you who he was. When the Creed says

"Son of God" it means a total identification of God with this man. Lord means sovereign master. A Lord is one to whom I give my allegiance.

But having elevated Jesus of Nazareth to identification with God, however, the Creed does an abrupt about-face in language so familiar we miss its intended impact. This Christ, very Son of God, the Creed says, was one of us. He was fully human. And as if in anticipation of the problems generations of people would have with the humanity of Christ the Creed hammers away at it with an altogether remarkable series of statements: "Born of the Virgin Mary" - that is to say, a product of the human birth process like everyone else; "Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Crucified, Dead and Buried". Now, that's just plain redundant. Crucified means dead. The Creed, with dogged determination, insists that we acknowledge His humanity. He was dead. And then, the exclamation point - "He descended into hell". Not as punishment: that's not it at all. Hell means Hades, Sheol. In the Hebrew idiom it was the place the spirits of the dead go. It means that He, Jesus Christ, Son of God, was as human as anyone who ever lived.

One of the more harrowing experiences I had as a newly ordained minister occurred when the Presbyterian Church decided to up-date some of the illustrations in its Church School curriculum. Jesus appeared in a tunic, a kind of burlap bermuda shorts outfit which in fact is probably what He and His disciples wore, particularly when fishing. It was not, however, the traditional effeminate white robe, fashionably styled, with which Salman has wrapped Him in every Sunday School room in the country. My people thought it was outrageous. He looked like a man - which, of course, is precisely what the Apostles' Creed takes great pains to affirm.

When the early Christians tried to describe Him they found themselves on the very edge of blasphemy. On the one hand, it was blasphemous for a Jew to attribute divinity to anyone but God. Jesus was tried, you will remember, for blasphemy: for desecrating the good name of God by claiming it for Himself. On the other hand, those who could accept the fact that God might be among humanity for three decades or so had an equal amount of trouble dealing with the suggestion that He became human in order to do it. For them that was blasphemy.

The theological question of the nature of Christ is not one about which we ordinarily generate much enthusiasm; although I have been trying to sharpen it a bit this morning. But it occurred to me that the Gospel of Jesus Christ still brings us close to the edge of blasphemy, which Webster defines, by the way, as "irreverance toward something considered sacred or inviolable".

The Gospel forces us to be specific about God and about Jesus Christ and I am in the process of concluding that that very specificity is a contemporary form of blasphemy. What seems to be sacred in American culture is a vague religiosity, a trust in the amorphous American dream and the innate goodness of the human race; which if left to its own devices will certainly achieve perfection; a God who blesses football games and P.T.A. meetings but cares little about poverty, abortion, ADC and Medicare. It is blasphemy to suggest otherwise. Suddenly in 1976, orthodox, Christian faith has become a political liability and a social embarrasament.

On a deeper level I sense that the Gospel, heard openly and willingly, will always bring us into conflict with what we ourselves are inclined to hold as sacred and right and proper. Somehow the good news that God loves us as we are, unconditionally; that all He wants from us is that we become everything He created us to

be and that we live in peace and love with Him and one another - somehow that very good news finds us looking the other way: trying to make it by some other device; scrambling up someone's ladder of goodness to find an always elusive Heaven.

If you saw the Academy Award Winning Motion Picture, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest", you saw, I believe, a parable of the blasphemy of the Gospel. Into a rigidly run mental hospital comes MacMurphy, a kind of classic trouble-maker who simply will not play by the rules. He confronts the system which, if not sacred, is at least proper in Nurse Ratched who knows what her patients need and how to keep them under control. MacMurphy is appalled that the twelve men who become his friends and followers have given up on themselves and allowed the nurse - the law - to determine who they will be. Within hours he has organized a poker game: then a make-believe baseball game on a non-existent TV: he inspires them to victory in a basketball game. In a hilarious, but theologically loaded sequence, MacMurphy and his disciples go fishing. A deaf and dumb man begins to talk: depressed men laugh: a stutterer speaks plainly. Near the end, as the pressure between MacMurphy and the system reaches the breaking point, he plans his escape. As a going-away present to his now rather confident and lively friends he throws a party. It turns out to be a disaster. One of his friends - the one who benefited most from MacMurphy's tutelage, betrays him to the nurse. MacMurphy dies, after psycho-surgery, in an act of compassion by a large rock of a man, who, himself escapes into freedom.

I don't know if Ken Kesey intended it, but the story is a remarkable parallel of the Gospel. The Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ is blasphemous because it says to us exactly what MacMurphy said to his fellow patients. "There is more to life than you are experiencing: you are more than you see yourself to be: you can enjoy life and experience yourself and your humanity in a very different way." (See Theology Today, p.285-290, October 1976).

For the disciples that meant breaking out of the prison of religious legalism: it meant actively loving people instead of merely refraining from killing them and stealing from them: it meant sharing and helping one another instead of fasting with long faces - and it was blasphemous because it stood in direct opposition to the accepted practices of religion. For us it means much the same. We are, sadly, still legalists at heart: we are still inclined to allow others to determine who we will be; to judge ourselves on the basis of the evil we avoid rather than the good we do. We still find slightly blasphemous the fact that the friends of Jesus were in no sense of the word the best people in society, but rather a crowd of sinners who were willing to cast their lot with Him and try to live a new life of love.

Does it really matter, finally, what we call Him? Isn't there some way to achieve the same results without getting tied up in creeds and theology and lengthy sermons? It might be tempting to try except for the fact that He doesn't seem to leave that option open. One time, at the apex of His ministry, He asked the disciples: "Who do men say that I am?" They responded with a very complimentary report: "Some say John the Baptist - others Elijah - Jeremiah - one of the prophets." That is very good company, by the way. But then, in a very significant move, He made an academic question intensely personal. "But who do you say that I am?"

In the final analysis it is not a question of religious philosophy or creedal exactness. Rather it is personal: one to one. Who do you say that I am? It all seems to hang on that.

Notice that Peter's response - "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" was the right one, but that Jesus knew he hadn't come to that conclusion independently. Rather it had been given to him: something of God's love had called it out of him. John Baillie, in an essay on the various theologies with which Jesus has been described, wrote at the end;

> "I just cannot read the Gospel story without knowing that I am being sought out in love..." (A Reasoned Faith, p.118).

And Karl Barth, perhaps the most brilliant theologian of our age, wrote humbly, "In this knowing we are not the masters but the mastered."

So it is for you and me. Our response to Jesus Christ is pulled out of us by His love - a love real enough to live our lives, and walk our dusty roads and die our death. It is not merely a matter of understanding the words: in fact, we may never fully understand. It is a matter of heart and love and commitment.

One thing is certain. Behind all the creeds, all the theology, all the ecclesiastical trappings, is a man: a man who asks - "But you - who do you say that I am?"

And we are Christians - His people - when and as we can confess - in whatever words we have "You are the Christ...you are what life has come to mean to me...You are my teacher, my friend, my judge, jury, companion and my Lord. And You I follow." Amen.

Father, break through our comfortable faith with the glad good news. Help us to see - as if for the first time - Jesus Christ - our Lord and Savior. Amen.